

Louise Otto-Peters, *Women's Right to Earn a Living* (1866)

Abstract

Louise Otto-Peters (1819–1895) was one of the most famous advocates of women's rights in the nineteenth century. She came from a middle-class family in the Saxon city of Meissen. In 1848/49, under the male pseudonym "Otto Stern," she championed the organization of women's work and advocated better working conditions for women: her aim was to give them an alternative to prostitution. Starting in April 1849, she served as editor of the *Women's Newspaper* [*Die Frauenzeitung*], but when the Kingdom of Saxony made it impossible for a woman to edit such a publication, the newspaper was moved to Thuringia. Louise Otto married August Peters in 1858. In 1865, together with Auguste Schmidt (1833–1902), Otto-Peters was one of the founders of the Leipzig Women's Education Association [*Leipziger Frauenbildungsverein*], from which the General German Women's Association [*Allgemeiner Deutscher Frauenverein*] grew later that year. The association's aims were to improve family law and allow women greater access to professions—the latter being a central theme of the following excerpt from Otto-Peters's 1866 book.

Source

Among proletarians, anyone who doesn't want to die of hunger must work. Certainly, it's said always and everywhere that the man is the breadwinner of the family, the earner, that the woman has only to tend to the household, but wherever it's common for a man to barely be able to support himself, as it is in the lower classes, a woman has to provide for herself, and the children—boys and girls alike—have to do the same once they're old enough to earn something. Those women do the meanest work for a daily wage, and they receive less income for it than the men who work as day laborers. People deem that appropriate, arguing that in many cases women's performance is lower since they are inherently weaker and that the male body requires greater nourishment than the female. One can't really argue, however, that splitting wood, carrying water and scrubbing, washing laundry and sweeping, or even ironing, which requires more skill, are light activities, since they are all known to be very strenuous—but the term "weaker sex" is not applied to such women; rather, it comes into play whenever one wants to scare women away from a particular craft or prove the impossibility of their being able to do something requiring power and stamina. But the women who are doing the heaviest labor are not the most lamentable ones by a long shot. At the moment, their wages have even seen a substantial increase, in most cases they are adequately fed, and though their work is strenuous, it is not really unhealthy, provided that it does not exceed a certain limit; and the daily wage usually suffices for a meager living. But those who have not learned to perform the roughest of tasks or whose powers are not equal to them, or those who are tied to home because of children or parents in need of care and who are thus prevented from hiring themselves out, must carry out those tasks that are everywhere denoted as specifically feminine: knitting, sewing, and embroidering. What tremendous competition there is in this area, what a high supply of labor relative to demand, and thus what low wages!

On average, a female knitter earns five neugroschen^[1] or 17 Rhenish/South German kreuzer^[2] for a pair of socks, and for this she has to work 2–3 days straight without doing anything else. Since this is the lightest work, it usually falls to children and older women who are incapable of other tasks. The ease of this work, its "on the side" nature, explains why more and more of it is taken on, despite the increasing perfection of the stocking frame, despite the invention and use of sewing machines. But what competition is there apart from the manufacture of stockings? Anyone who knits continuously can earn about 15 to 18 pfennigs or eight Rhenish kreuzer—but who has so many clients? Since knitting is an easy

job that can be done while talking, even while reading and walking, hundreds [of women] knit merely to avoid idleness and then sell their work as well.

[...]

If only you had seen these girls and women from the Upper Ore Mountains! The children, who grow up in stuffy rooms, look like ghosts: pale, with skinny arms and legs and bodies bloated from the only food they have, the potato. The father had either suffered an early death in the cobalt blue works or was travelling throughout the region, peddling articles made of wood and panniers in which to store pine shavings; wife and children have to work at home, as he can't take care of them! The little girls have to make pillow lace just as soon as they can properly move their tiny hands; they wither away at the same lace-making pillow where their mother also withered away—so much so that she could only give birth to sickly children—that same lace-making pillow where their grandmother went blind! For fixing their gazes on the fine threads, needles, and tiny bobbins deprives the eyes of their sight, and the animated movement of the little bobbins—often 50 to 100—makes the fingers delicate and tender, the arms weak and skinny, unfit for anything else. And then the clever people come and say: these women could do something other than make pillow lace—it's crazy that they still insist on doing so. No, when they've done nothing but make pillow lace since they were small children, then they can't do anything else. For they never had a chance to build up their strength and are thus utterly incapable of heavy work—even if one could find it for them.

I have already listed the wages paid for some types of women's work. Well, if only the women were actually always paid! Even poor seamstresses have to accept credit and are often paid late—and sometimes not at all. Many of the truly rich have no conception of work, no idea that a poor young girl who neither begs nor looks like a beggar can still desperately need a few thalers. Quite often, the elegant ladies also have no inkling of how long it takes to sew a piece, and instead of using their own speed as a gauge, which they could very easily do, they say: well, of course it takes *us* a long time to finish such a piece because we only work on it every now and then, but for those who do needlework all day long, the work just flies—it's incredible how much they can finish in a day. For it is not customary for rich people to apply the same standards to the poor that they use for themselves; instead, they practically regard the poor as different beings, as a different species. Thus, they are not familiar with the worries and needs of the bashful poor—a few thalers or guilders amounts to so little for rich folks, and therefore they often actually forget about such a pittance. But in that very forgetting lies all the egoism, all that is contrary to nature, all the un-Christian behavior that accompanies false piety, all the inhumanity that exists alongside the humanitarian efforts of today's society!

NOTES

[1] A coin worth ten pfennigs—trans.

[2] A coin worth four pfennigs—trans.

Source: Louise Otto, *Das Recht der Frauen auf Erwerb. Blicke auf das Frauenleben der Gegenwart*. Hamburg, 1866, pp. 19–20, 23–24; reprinted in Hartwig Brandt and Ewald Grothe, eds., *Quellen zur Alltagsgeschichte der Deutschen 1815–1870*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2005, pp. 106–8.

Translation: Erwin Fink

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